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ABSTRACT

The teacher's role in open educational settings is the central focus of this study. The perceptions, understandings, and beliefs of 66 teachers (K-4, associated with open education programs for at least 2 years) regarding basic issues of implementing an open approach were examined through in-depth professional interviews. Factors that teachers perceive as hindering or facilitating change in open directions were identified; a study of the relationship between beliefs and attitudes about educational issues to instructional practice was initiated. (Also included in this study is the appendix, Teacher Perception of Support from Advisors.) (Author)

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Teacher Perspective on Change to an Open Approach [1,2]

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In addition to priorities concerning the institutional and community aspects of school life, a major purpose of the open education movement is to promote greater responsibility for decision-making on the part of both children and teachers. Without at all minimizing the significance of this more responsible role for children, it is the shouldering of greater responsibility by teachers that may well be the more central and radical change for American public schools. The question of how teachers move from a conventional role to one of greater curricular significance is a key issue in any case, and one that constitutes the heart of this study. This paper reports on one aspect of the study.

Rationale

From a psychological standpoint, the most basic consideration in designing the study involved the determinants of behavior and behavioral change. The position we have taken is one that has a long history of experimental and clinical investigation -- namely, that a person's perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes not only serve to filter experience but also act as powerful mediating influences on behavior. For example, in accordance with one of the more comprehensive and systematically developed theories of belief systems (Rokeach, 1960, 1970), behavior is viewed as always being a function of at least two major types of attitudes -- attitudes focused on objects (people, things, ideas) and attitudes focused on situations or events. It should be noted that the concept of "attitude" used in this sense differs from other response dispositions (trace, habit, motive) in that it also represents a

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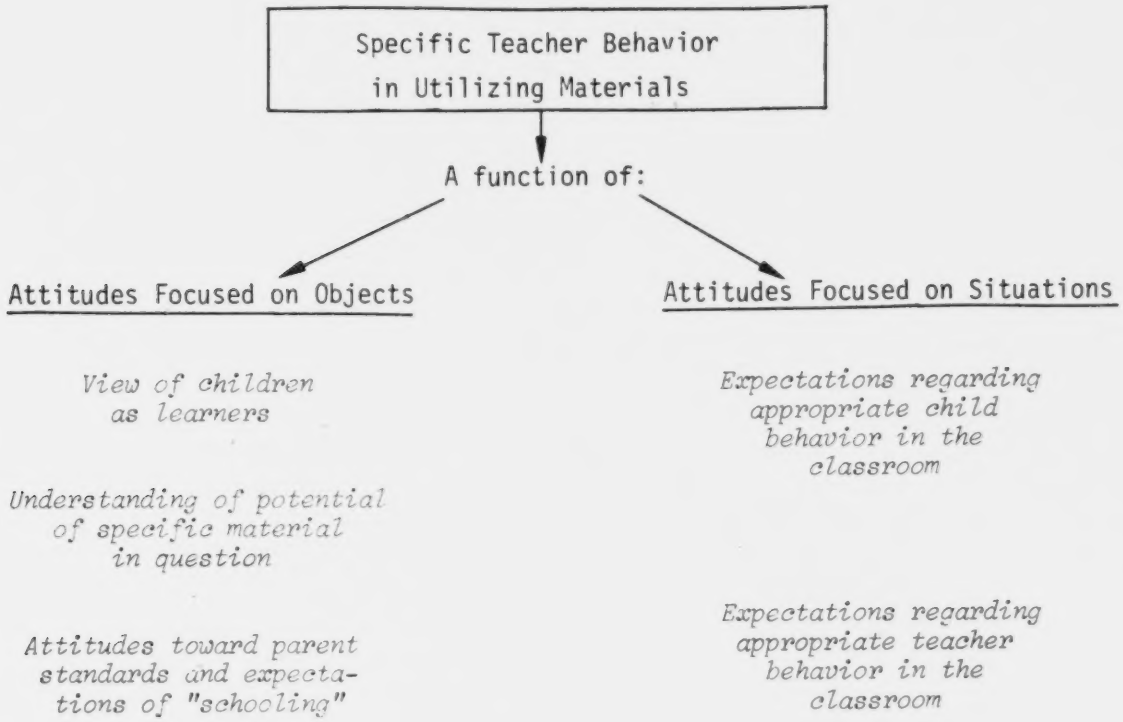
person's knowledge and view of the world.[3] For illustrative purposes, a particular bit of observable teacher behavior in utilizing materials might be schematically represented as follows:


Specific Teacher Behavior in Utilizing Materials
A function of:
Attitudes Focused on Objects
View of children as learners
Understanding of potential of specific material in question
Attitudes toward parent standards and expectations of "schooling"
Attitudes Focused on Situations
Expectations regarding appropriate child behavior in the classroom
Expectations regarding appropriate teacher behavior in the classroom

Thus, the starting point for an understanding and assessment of behavioral change is the study of attitudes and beliefs with respect to the realm or area in which change is being attempted.

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[3]This is also true, of course, for Kelly's (1955) notion of "personal constructs;" for the idea of "conceptual systems" set forth by Harvey, Hunt, and Schroder (1961); and for similar theoretical notions within the phenomenological tradition.

From a methodological viewpoint, it was thought that attitudes and beliefs could best be inferred from intensive, in-depth interviews -- conducted in an atmosphere that was relatively neutral with respect to a person's usual working environment. Such interview protocols could then be studied not only for the content of attitudes and beliefs, but -- equally important -- for their structural properties as well: salience, differentiation, informational support, integration, isolation, and so forth.

To summarize, the following psychological assumptions may be said to underlie the present study:

- consistent and enduring behavior patterns are mediated to a large degree by the structure and content of belief systems;
- behavior changes in teachers that do not involve corresponding changes in beliefs and attitudes (but are induced by salesmanship, urging, or imposition) are hypothesized to be non-enduring and/or ephemeral in nature;
- basic changes in attitudes and beliefs will be reflected in behavior (some in highly predictable areas of behavior, some in unforeseen areas) but with unknown latencies.

Method and Sample

Using the method of an in-depth interview, we talked with a total of 64 teachers in the spring of 1972. Although each question in the interview had the purpose of exploring certain terrains, the format was open-ended, permitting the teacher to stress and to reiterate those things that were uppermost in his or her mind. The interviewing was done by the three principal investigators, and all interviews were recorded on tape. The interviews averaged two-and-one-half to three hours in length.

Most of the teachers interviewed were working at the kindergarten through third grade level; and of the total sample, fifty were working with the assistance of an advisory group. To oversimplify matters, the idea of an advisory represents a developmental view of in-service teacher education, with the advisors attempting to take teachers "where they are" and to extend from there. As such, the advisory differs in significant ways from other types of training programs and from the usual supervisory functions.

The advisory groups with whom we worked were: The Community Resources Institute and The Open Corridor Program, both operating within public schools in New York City; and the Education Development Center Advisory in Newton, Massachusetts which sponsors a Follow Through program. The actual sites where we interviewed EDC Follow Through teachers were Burlington, Vt. and Scranton, Pa. The remaining teachers in the sample were not a part of an advisory program, but had been attending workshop centers voluntarily, on a more or less regular basis, either at Creative Teaching Workshop in New York City or at one of the Greater Boston Teacher Centers.

The three advisories mentioned above share much in terms of their views toward education and their assumptions about how children, teachers, and schools can best function. However, they also have unique priorities, and they differ significantly in the conditions of their advising. Thus, one maintained a close, almost daily contact with teachers; another saw teachers periodically, with a month or more between contacts.

In some respects the teachers in the sample can be described as unusual -- unusual in the sense that they either agreed to or sought out the possibility of participating in an advisory program billed as "innovative" or "experimental." Their knowledge of what the advisories represented varied tremendously -- some had a clear conception of what they were enlisting for, whereas others had only a hazy notion at best. Of this volunteering group, one-third displayed what we judged to be maximal motivation to join; they actively sought out the opportunity in a number of ways. Another third displayed minimal motivation; they simply agreed to participate when asked (or in some cases politely pressured) by the principal.

Although there is this unusual quality about the sample in the willingness to undertake at least some risks by participating in an "innovative" program," the teachers can also be described as quite average. They work in self-contained classrooms, and the majority teach one grade level (only a fifth of them are working with multi-age groups of children). Approximately one half of the teachers have taught for five years or longer -- three for over twenty years. The majority earned their college degrees majoring in education. Their teaching experience tends to have been confined to one school system, generally in schools serving communities of low or middle and low incomes.

This "ordinariness" of the sample seems important to emphasize, because one version of open education that is often discussed in the literature portrays it almost as an ideal attainable only by Super Teachers working in super conditions. Although our sample probably includes a few super teachers (by almost anyone's criteria), for the most part it looks like a fairly typical cross-section of American elementary school teachers. We make this point because it seems fairly clear by now that elementary education in this country is not going to be changed significantly by curricula that are teacher-proof (the overwhelming evidence suggests that there is no such thing) -- nor can we expect suddenly to have our schools staffed exclusively by high-powered, exceptional human beings. If open education is seen as a movement to make elementary schools more responsive to human resources (both child and adult), then its success or failure must be judged by evidence that the majority of "ordinary" teachers can be helped to articulate and realize better standards of learning and instruction.

The Teaching Process: Interview Content and Data

During the first half of the interview, questions and issues relating to the actual teaching process were discussed in some depth -- such things as room arrangement, the value of different kinds of materials, how the day is organized, the nature and basis for instructional planning, the role of children's interests and emotions in learning, how to evaluate children's learning, and so on. Aside from the wealth of practical insights and suggestions to be extracted from these data, the coding of this section will revolve around the educational values and assumptions which emerged again and again as underlying themes of the teachers' preoccupations, beliefs, and concerns. For example, it is clear that teachers have different orientations with respect to the value they see in small group work and increased interaction among children. Likewise, they have different working assumptions about how children learn, about the nature and organization of knowledge, about the purpose and goals of curriculum.

From this coding of values and working assumptions, we anticipate being able to describe or characterize the basic frame of reference from which the teacher operates -- that is, the priorities and understandings that guide teaching behavior. Another way to put it is that the "frame of reference" will attempt to encapsulate what the teacher perceives he or she is doing vis à vis "open education." One frame of reference, for example, is basically a "method orientation" -- with the teacher attempting to do new "things" and

introduce new materials. Another appears to be a "managerial orientation" -- where the teacher is trying to run 25 tutorials in an effort to individualize instruction. In other cases, it seems as if the teacher is operating from more of a full-blown "model orientation," struggling to replicate some vague or fairly detailed image of what a British Infant School classroom looks like. For other teachers, however, the frame of reference is of a more abstract nature. That is, it appears marked by assumptions and values that constitute standards of quality with respect to the teaching/learning process -- standards that guide instructional activity and provide a basis for evaluating what has been accomplished.

Although coding schemes for this portion of the interview have been constructed and tried out, the tapes have not yet been systematically coded. Nevertheless, it is important to mention these "frames of reference" for two reasons. First, a good deal of material for identifying the teacher's frame of reference kept surfacing and emerging during the latter half of the interview as well. Second, the notion of "frames of reference" is a useful one in distinguishing what the advisories are and are not trying to accomplish. In general, the advisors with whom we have worked are very definitely not trying to promote a particular model of education or specific methods of teaching. They are <u>not</u> operating from either a model or method framework. Rather, they are attempting to assist teachers to broaden their perception of the teaching/learning process -- to enrich and increase their response repertoires so that they (the teachers) become better able to respond effectively to the cognitive and emotional needs and resources of children. Of equal interest to these educators is that schools become places where teachers as well as children learn. They wish to help teachers identify and expand their own resources and potential, to see new ways of utilizing outside resources, to uncover new possibilities in working relationships with other adults in the school and community -- in order to capitalize more fully on the available human capabilities and talents. Thus, they seek to assist teachers to evolve standards of quality with respect to teaching and learning.

<u>The Working Environment: Interview Content and Data</u>.

What advisors actually do to assist and support teachers covers a wide range of activities and, of course, varies considerably from advisor to advisor and from school to school -- with different schools offering different possibilities and constraints for advisors. What we were interested in tapping

during the second half of the interview was not so much what advisors actually do, but what the teacher viewed as major supportive and facilitating influences, as well as inhibiting and destructive influences, in her efforts to move in more open directions. Thus, during the second portion of the interview -- the Working Environment section -- we spent a good deal of time discussing the advisory and how it operates, how the teacher got into the program in the first place, what her skepticisms were then and now, what she sees as particularly helpful in workshops and the advisor's activity, what needs improvement, and so on. We also delved into other aspects of the working environment -- the relationship with other teachers, aides or paraprofessionals, principal, parents, and various viewpoints about the school as an institution -- its climate, policies, rules, and regulations, expectations regarding teacher responsibility.

Coding for this portion of the interview has now been completed and some preliminary findings are beginning to emerge. Of all the coding schemes that were devised, one of particular interest is the teacher's perception of support from advisors -- the scheme attached as Appendix A.

Although this scheme is fairly self-explanatory, it does need some clarification. First, it should be noted that most of the categories refer to the content or nature of the kind of interactions perceived as supportive by the teachers. The two exceptions are category E at the bottom of page 1 and category F at the top of page 2. These are of a different nature -- describing different types of emotional support. In general, category F statements indicated perception of emotional support at a more selective and differentiated level than category E statements. The ordering of the categories also reflects a general progression from a kind of consumer orientation to a more mediating stance on the part of the teacher. That is, the first page categories suggest a more receptive, "taking in" posture, with the teacher doing little in the way of modulating experience. The second page categories, on the other hand, suggest a more active role by the teacher in terms of self-investment, critical judgment, inference, conceptual reorganization, or other ways of modulating and contributing to the supportive activities of the advisors.

It must be emphasized, however, that this general progression is not to be judged as running from "bad to good" with respect to what advisors actually do -- you can increase a teacher's knowledge and alternatives by demonstrating how to use materials, and you can certainly provide a better climate for teacher experimentation by acting as a buffer with the administration when that is necessary. On the other hand, it is not unreasonable to assume that one goal of the advisories is to help move the teacher from exclusive use of page one type support to a more active (page two) role in his or her own growth -- and most advisors are, in fact, quite uneasy about responding exclusively to "C" type requests.

The perception of support coding was done by listening directly to the latter half of the interview on the tapes, with at least two people listening. This coding procedure was initiated after we had established sufficient reliability among the five coders independently. All statements eligible for coding were placed in a category. To be eligible, the statement had to indicate clearly that the particular activity was seen by the teacher as supportive -- and was not merely a description of what advisors were doing in the school. Statements were coded in such a way as to distinguish between support actually being received and support that the teacher wanted but was not getting or not getting "enough of." From this coding, we could then make a profile for each teacher that reflected both the range and intensity of support being actually drawn upon or sought.

A few concrete examples will help to illustrate this scheme -- and the interesting manner in which different teachers perceived similar kinds of activities quite differently. One very typical way in which advisors work is to go in the classroom and actually work with a child or group of children. Here are some slightly paraphrased comments about this type of activity:

> "Her (the advisor's) way of working is the best way I learn. She'll come in the room - look around - then maybe discuss things with me a few minutes. Then she'll sit down and work with some children, and she'll talk in a very loud voice so I can hear without having to stop what I'm doing. I literally learned how to talk and work with children in new ways from listening to her." [This remark was coded in the "I" category.]

Contrast this with the following remark:

> "I'm not very good at extending on the spur of the moment but the Advisor is great at this -- especially in nature and science -- I'd like him to come in every day and work with the kids. He'll go in and start fiddling around with something and have a group of kids interested -- and I wouldn't know enough to start fiddling around with it in the first place. I feel he can add something that I can't to my classroom." [This was coded in the B category.]

Or, consider this teacher's comment:

> "Oh, yes, they come right in the room and work -- and when they're there, they usually do something I wouldn't have thought of -- and I try to jot it down so I can remember to do it later." [This was coded in category C.]

To illustrate the different perceptions of emotional support, here are the comments of two more teachers:

> "Teachers working in structured classrooms don't get this kind of support and they need it too. All you have is the supervisor coming in and telling you 'what songs to teach this week' - and that's no help. It's a warmer atmosphere now -- you don't feel you're alone doing this big job." [A remark coded in E.]

Compare the above to an F category comment, made by a teacher who obviously does not perceive support in "C" terms.

> I'll tell you where it goes awry -- if an advisor wants you to do her thing -- run your classroom kind of her way, because she can't cope with your way -- she can't get her head to where yours is at -- then it's no good. Cause that's only one more hurdle . . . one more hassle . . . one more burden. We try to tune in to kids -- who they are, where they are, what they are -- and you have to get the same kind of thing from the advisory. Otherwise it's just another supervisor coming in and saying 'everything's fine, but why don't you try that other little game' -- these games and gimmicks -- I don't believe in any of that stuff plucked from thin air."

So much by way of illustration. Although we have not integrated all the data as yet, some preliminary observations can be made. First, it looks as if teachers perceptions of support do vary to some extent as a function of the way advisories actually operate. It would be premature to comment further on this finding now, but it will be discussed in our report later this year.

A much more intriguing finding is the way perception-of-support patterns appear to be related to the teacher's frame of reference that was referred to previously. Inasmuch as we have been able to identify these "frames of reference" from material taken from the latter half of the interview, the following (again preliminary and tentative) observation seems justified. Those teachers who seem to be operating from a more independent, active, "evolving standards of quality" framework are clearly drawing from the whole range of support available to them. In some cases their profiles are almost evenly split between page one and page two categories, while in other cases the greater weight is on utilization of page 2 support. In contrast, those teachers operating from more of a "model" or "method" framework -- those who regard open education more as an "it" which they are trying to do -- they are pulling almost exclusively on page one support.

It should be emphasized that these are initial findings, and obviously there is more coding and integrating to be done. We also intend to re-interview a small subsample of teachers this spring and to visit their classrooms. It seems clear at this time, however, that one result of the study will be useful implications for how advisory groups might best work with teachers over time. And, more broadly speaking, we anticipate that the study of belief systems will lead to better understanding of the meaning, purpose, and effectiveness of the teacher's actual classroom behavior.

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Appendix A

TEACHER PERCEPTION OF SUPPORT FROM ADVISORS*

X No Supportive Perception: advisors still seen as supervisory figures; checking up on teacher; vaguely threatening.

ADVISORS PERCEIVED AS:

A. SERVICE/ADMINISTRATIVE AGENT

- brings/makes/orders materials
- reimburses expenses; arranges time off
- acts as buffer with school administration

B. EXTENSION OF TEACHER (helping hand; parallel activity)

- helps work with children/provides additional experiences for children
- helps with room arrangement
- helps in making materials
- helps in corridor or resource room

C. STAGE DIRECTOR/DEMONSTRATOR (teacher apparently transmits idea/activity directly into classroom with little or no modification)

- shows how to work with children
- shows what to do/not to do (offering specific direction, criticism)
- shows how to use materials/how to set up room
- determines teacher's needs; points out next steps
- suggests specific "helpful hints" (record keeping, scheduling day)
- offers "constructive criticism"--teacher does not specify further

D. DIAGNOSTICIAN/PROBLEM SOLVER (end result is a concrete suggestion or solution)

- identifies and analyzes problem areas
- advises on specific problems (children, room, etc.)

* *

E. EMOTIONAL STABILIZER/STIMULATER

- gives reinforcement and praise
- boosts morale
- listens sympathetically; "cares"
- makes everyone feel "supported"
- inspires sense of group belonging

* (The examples in each category are illustrative only and not intended as an exhaustive definition of the category.)

F. RESPECTER OF INDIVIDUALITY

- knows where teacher is
- accepts where teacher is
- values and respects individual and his/her professional integrity

* *

G. PROVIDER OF ALTERNATIVES (teacher judgment exercised in selecting and/or modifying ideas)

- contributes ideas about curriculum and instructional activities which teacher feels he/she can later adapt at the right time and place
- conducts group meetings where teacher's general repertoire of ideas is increased
- arranges workshops at teacher's request where new materials/activities can be explored

H. EXPLAINER/LECTURER/THEORIST

- explicates principles
- explains reasons for specific actions in a theoretical context
- provides literature on open education

I. MODELING AGENT

- provides a model of interaction with children over materials/problems or with other teachers over classroom/school issues from which teacher can infer general principles or patterns of new behavior

J. APPRECIATIVE CRITIC/DISCUSSANT/THOUGHTFUL OBSERVER

- discusses matters in-depth with teacher
- analyzes classroom from a framework that teacher judges knowledgeable and understanding; expands teacher's own framework for evaluation

K. PROVOCATIVE/REFLECTIVE AGENT

- asks questions to stimulate thought
- helps teacher become aware of own progress/needs
- helps teacher clarify/solidify thought--"bouncing ideas off advisor", "playing with ideas"

L. LEADER/CHALLENGER/EXTENDER

- stimulates/pushes continuing growth
- leads teacher to new insights, greater conceptual understanding of the teaching/learning process
- acts as an "enabler" of teachers in similar way that teacher is an "enabler" of children

M. AGENT OF SOCIAL/PHILOSOPHICAL CHANGE

- promotes new patterns of relationships--among teachers, between teacher-child, between school and parents, within institution, etc.
- encourages new priorities in values--about learning, individual differences, decision-making, responsibility, etc.